

The importance of heritage on the overall perceived image of a place: Barcelona seen by its residents

Abstract

Place branding literature generally defines heritage as a major attribute that composes place brands. Moreover, the concept of heritage is deeply connected to place identity, to the point that some authors describe it as its DNA. In this sense, the aim of this article is to test the importance of heritage on the overall perceived image of the city of Barcelona (Spain) by analyzing opinions and perceptions from its local residents. To do so, 300 citizens were surveyed from 10th December 2014 to 30th January 2015 by using a specialized questionnaire designed for studying overall place image perception. Results of the study showed that heritage was a highly valued attribute that clearly dominated above other key attributes in the minds of citizens. Finally, potential opportunities and advantages for Barcelona's brand arising from those perceptions are discussed.

Keywords: Barcelona; heritage; perceived image; place branding; public relations; residents.

Introduction

Heritage, sometimes included in the wider concept of culture, is often defined as one of the main attributes that may determine place brands [e.g. Anholt 2006: 103]. However, place branding researchers sometimes forget that the concept of heritage – understood in its wider meaning of cultural, tangible and intangible, and natural– is also deeply connected to place identity [Curtin, Gaither 2007: 178; Graham, Howard 2008; Peterková 2003: 3; Palmer 1999: 315; Smith 2006: 301], which in turn is the essence from which any place brand should be built. That creates a theoretical strong correlation between heritage and place brand identity, not always considered by professional praxis in place branding.

In fact, academically, heritage can be defined as the “DNA” of places [Mateos Rusillo 2009: 21], or at least as one of the main determinants of the individual character of places [Ashworth 1994: 19]. Moreover, heritage is useful in “creating bonds through shared experiences and acts of creation” [Smith 2006: 308] and even it can “promote self-knowledge, facilitate communication and learning, and guide the stewardship of the present culture and its historic past” [Silverman, Ruggles 2007: 3]. Finally, heritage is a concept to which most people would assign a positive value [Silverman, Ruggles 2007: 3], hence it could be stated that having a place image rooted on heritage is not only an option, but it is something highly recommended due to its theoretical benefits for a place.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to test the importance of heritage on the overall perceived image of the city of Barcelona (Spain)¹ by analyzing opinions and perceptions from its local residents. In this sense, it should be noted that residents represent a key audience both in place marketing and in place branding theories [e.g. Braun *et al.* 2013].

Methodology

A specialized methodology created for an active international project of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA)² was applied. Specifically, a Spanish version of a questionnaire previously tested in Yekaterinburg (Russia) by the Ural Federal University was posted on Internet using the software Typeform, which was operating online since 10th December 2014 to 30th January 2015. It should be noted that only residents who were older than 16 and lived in the city of Barcelona for 10 years or more, could use the link and fill out the form.

300 participants from a population of 1.401.822 were surveyed, that is, approximately, the population of Barcelona that was older than 16 in 2013³. With a 95 % of confidence level, this sample implies a confidence interval of 4.25; thus, it could be considered a statistically representative study compared to many other academic opinion polls. Furthermore, it should be noted that proportions of gender and age obtained have been similar to those found in the city's population.

Results and Discussion

As a first remarkable result, when participants were asked about valuing fifteen specific facets of living in the city, three aspects deeply linked to heritage and culture were chosen among the top positions (See Graphic located on nested pages). More concretely, the city sightseeing was considered in second place; cultural events in third; and city architecture in fourth. Therefore, heritage was highly valued for residents, to the point that it led the positive facets of living in Barcelona.

Another remarkable result was obtained when participants were asked to write a definition of Barcelona as if they were not only residents, but also other kinds of stakeholders, such as labor immigrants, tourists, young citizens, and the city government. Heritage – including ideas such as art, architecture, Modernism, Gaudi or museums – was the most common concept written as a description of tourists'

¹ A city that, according to several global rankings, is one of the leading Mediterranean hubs in terms of economic development, commerce, tourism, innovation, design, quality of life, security or marine transportation, among other fields.

² For more information about this project see: <http://www.euprera.org/?p=78> [Consulted 20th March 2015].

³ According to www.bcn.cat [Consulted 20th March 2015].

image of Barcelona; even above other main tourist attributes, such as leisure and entertainment, weather, beaches, etc. Therefore, it can be derived that heritage played the most important role in attracting visitors according to its residents. Coming up next, the second stakeholder's point of view in which heritage was more dominant on city image creation was their own point of view as residents. In this sense, heritage appears as an important and positive attribute when citizens think on what defines their hometown. Finally, it's noteworthy that, according to participants, the image of Barcelona that young citizens, the city government and labor immigrants have is practically unrelated to heritage. Thus, it can be stated that citizens don't think on heritage as an important asset for labor attraction, youth engagement or city management.

Another salient point was that the most common ideas given from participants that could be linked to heritage were, by far, "Antoni Gaudi" and "Modernism". This entails that, even if Barcelona is an old city that has several heritage sites of different periods (such as Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Neoclassical or Contemporary, among others); the only period that stood out among them was Modernism; and more specially, its most famous artist: Antoni Gaudi. In other words, for participants, heritage was synonymous of Modernism; the same vision that city brand managers have been projecting strategically since the Olympics of 1992. In this sense, it should be pointed that perception of citizens in relation to Modernism has moved from disinterest or even hatred in much of the 20th century – when tens of Modernist buildings were demolished with the support of residents, and even the Modernist icon, the Sagrada Familia, was seriously threatened, – to being the source of admiration and identity that is nowadays; a remarkable change of perception that could be probably considered a product of place branding strategies.

Table 1

Answers to the question "What direction from the table, on your opinion, the city of Barcelona can be proud of its uniqueness?" n = 297		
	n (%)	95 % CI
Architecture	242 (81.4 %)	77.15–85.65
World popularity	172 (57.9 %)	53.65–62.15
Creative projects	121 (40.7 %)	36.4–44.95
Cultural traditions	97 (32.6 %)	28.35–36.85
Ethnic diversity	95 (32 %)	27.75–36.25
Its role in famous historical events	67 (22.5 %)	18.25–26.75
Famous personalities	34 (11.4 %)	7.15–15.65
Nature peculiarities	33 (11.1 %)	6.85–15.35
Production of unique goods and products	27 (9.1 %)	4.85–13.35
Good ecological situation	22 (7.4 %)	3.15–11.65

Finally, other prominent results were extracted when participants were asked to choose the most unique distinctive assets of Barcelona from a list of ten [See Table 1], from which can be concluded that architecture (81 %), and therefore heritage, was by far the most chosen asset of the city considered as unique.

Conclusions

The study has proved that heritage cannot be considered as a mere attribute that shapes Barcelona's city brand in the minds of residents; on the contrary, it appears as the authentic soul of the city and its purest identity, with very high visibility and with very good evaluation by most of participants.

Also, taking into account that results appear consistent with the multidisciplinary literature discussed at the beginning of the article, it can be argued that brand managers of Barcelona have an excellent opportunity to reap the multiple benefits that heritage represents for a place brand, at least when communicating with one of the most basic and fundamental stakeholders of the city: its local residents, which predominantly perceive a clear and positive identity of their hometown linked to heritage. Hence, a brand strategy based on such a concept appears coherent with what city population wants to be. Moreover, even when communicating and promoting other strategic sectors of economic development, it would be advisable to take into account values linked to heritage in general and Modernism in particular, so that the resultant story is true to Barcelona's identity.

Finally, it highlights the fact that citizens don't think on heritage as an important asset for labor attraction, youth engagement or city management, whereas it strongly affects tourist attraction and resident satisfaction. In order to contrast these views with reality, future studies may analyze the importance of heritage on the overall perceived image of the place in the minds of other key stakeholders of the city.

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